

Two Poets of the Peasantry

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and death with the other, It knows not what
It does'?
Certainly with the Nature of many a modern
poet, or
the Spirits and the Immanent Will of Hardy's
Dynasts, we
are nearer once more to the Zeus of the
Prometheus, or
the Aphrodite of the *Hippolytus*, to the
Dionysus of the
Bacchae or the Venus and the 'Nature' of
Lucretius, than
to the Trinity of Langland. It has become far
harder for a
humaner world to believe at once in good
and God.

None the less in certain ways Langland
does remain
more sympathetic. The Greek is healthier,
but harder;
less censorious, but less compassionate; just,
but over-
canny. 'Sacrifice to the gods, and you will end
by buying
your neighbour's field instead of his buying
yours'—'even
with your brother, smile but have a witness to
his word⁵
(after all Hesiod had gained bitter experience
here with
his own Perses)—'the farmer needs (note the
order) a
house first of all, a wife, and an ox to plough'.
This tone
of 'devil-take-the-hindmost', one must in
fairness admit,
is very inferior to Langland's pity for the
poor. Yet it is
impossible not to be amused by some of the old
Boeotian's
mother-wit, 'Decline with thanks a small ship,
and load
your freight on a large one'—'take your fill of
the wine-
jar at the beginning and at the end, but be
sparing in the
middle; it is a poor thing to be thrifty in the
dregs'¹⁴—'get

a labourer of forty to 'plough and sow; a
younger man's
wits go hankering after his mates'. It is the
voice of a man
himself past forty, the individualistic peasant
whose heart
is in his stocking with his hard-won savings
rather than
looking for companionship in life. Human
relations for
him are business relations. No doubt, it is
good to have
friends, they may always come in useful; but
it is still
more important to be friends with your
relatives, and

¹*Cf. Samuel Butler's analogous precept of eating
one's largest
grapes first.